

Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, Oxford University Press, New York 1985, pp. 299.

The second important book on German socialism by Lidtke is very different from his first. *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878–1890* (1966) explored how political ideas changed under the pressure of events. The new study seeks instead to explore the cultural milieu of Social Democracy and its meaning. The associations affiliated with Social Democracy, namely, the gymnastic, choral, drama, bicycling and educational organizations, become the means by which club life, festivals and songs are analyzed. Thereby the whole social-cultural milieu of Social Democracy during Imperial Germany is presented and evaluated.

The exceptionally well-organized materials are utilized to challenge the dominant view about the SPD as presented by Guenther Roth in the early 1960s. Lidtke suggests that Roth's »negative integrationist« perspective which defined Social Democracy as a sub-culture, separate from but a mirror image of the dominant culture, is misleading. Instead, he points out that the SPD offered an »alternative culture in which organized workers could fulfill their needs for companionship, sociability, recreation, learning and aesthetic satisfaction.« (p. 3) That alternative culture's relationship to the dominant culture was »very complex and the border lines between the two realms were at some points scarcely discernible.« (p. 4) Further, Lidtke argues that the labor milieu »was held together by a number of interacting elements – occupational identification, class awareness, secular rituals, symbolisms, the hostility of nonsocialist German society, a broad and diffuse sense of ideology [. . .]« (p. 6) The latter is emphasized because Lidtke thinks that in some ways the labor movement was more positively integrated in the larger society than previously thought, yet remained a significant destabilizing factor. »In actuality the socialist labor movement was a genuine threat to the Imperial system though not necessarily through overt revolutionary political action.« (p. 7) In sum, Lidtke tries to restore the imbalance of historians who have claimed repeatedly that reformism and integration dominated German labor. Instead, »the socialist labor movement presented German society with a radical alternative to existing norms and arrangements.« (p. 7)

Lidtke's strength is in demonstrating how the values of even the most moderate SPD factions were an unacceptable threat to the basic assumptions and norms of the middle and upper classes. In throwing out this challenge to the established historical views, he maintains that the socialists were involved in a process by which they were creating a world of their own. He thinks that the implicit or explicit integrationist model also fails because it assumes a coherent Imperial society. Instead, he suggests that local and regional impulses remained strong in the face of nationalizing trends and institutions. He offers three notions for a »more balanced and historically accurate« view of Imperial Germany: segmentation, conflict and coercion. With this basis Lidtke seeks to explain the ambiguous behavior of labor's social organizations.

How does Lidtke carry out his tasks offering a different way to see Social Democracy and Imperial Germany? He summarizes the governments' coercive efforts and campaigns against the SPD. He notes the attempts by the government and the political right to create organizations to counter the SPD's cultural challenges in education and among youth. He outlines the variety of singing societies, gymnastics clubs, cycling clubs, swimming clubs, athletic clubs for wrestling, boxing, or weight lifting, rowing clubs, sailing clubs, soccer clubs, dramatic societies, stenographic associations, samaritan associations, health clubs and consumer societies plus temperance and freethinker groups. The general development of these clubs is placed within the context of German club life with its tendencies toward specialization and centralization. Lidtke presents the bureaucratic opposition and harassment which the Social Democratic clubs had to endure during and after the Anti-Socialist Law. The clubs' growth

in numbers and members is shown to have reinforced specialization and centralization. Paid professionals often replaced volunteers. The composition of the clubs, their recruitment sources and their overlap with union or party membership, the age structure, turn-over rates and difficulties with officialdom are detailed. The shifting relationships with bourgeois clubs are noted in a few cases. Generally Lidtke paints a picture of vibrant club life which drew many persons into Social Democracy. At this level he substantiates his thesis.

When he dips deeper into club life, festivals, songs, poetry, drama and educational work, Lidtke seeks also to clarify the meaning of pubs, official names, rituals and banners. He acknowledges the scarcity of sources, for instance on the meaning attached by participants to these external means of identification or separation. However, he does illustrate well the tension between performance and »symbolizing ideology« within and between clubs. The club debates about allowing competition or prizes reflected the problem of club purpose. The desire to perform well was pitted against the ideal of pleasure or advancing political purity and comradeship. An unresolved problem is that Lidtke seeks to generalize from the experience of too many different clubs with divergent functions and purposes. He does, however, correct views offered by authors such as Mosse who think that festivals can be equated with religious phenomenon. Lidtke points out that symbols were respected, not worshipped, and that festivals were an emotional and harmonious contrast to the intellectual discussions of party congresses. Festivals also offered a sense of belonging and family participation not available elsewhere in the movement. The political coloring and implications are underscored by Lidtke as he notes police surveillance, interference and denial of processions. Similarly much opposition existed to the nationalists' organizations via labor's voluntary associations. Noteworthy is that despite »the increasing importance of performance and sociability, labor movement festivals never lost their political implications.« (p. 100) Festivals, for instance, are presented as having »fused together diverse strands into living units that could be experienced by participants as coherent wholes.« (p. 101) However, Lidtke provides little illustration for the latter point, namely how the participants experienced the forms, organizations and groupings he describes so well. The same criticism would have to be offered for his sections on songs, poetry, drama and education, though on the latter the emancipatory meaning to the participants is clearer. Throughout he convincingly illustrates the relationship to the larger society. For instance, he finds that in songs and poetry the socialists borrowed forms and norms from German culture.

Missing in Lidtke's study are the intermediate voluntary organizations, also associated with labor. Groups such as the pub keepers' association were voluntary but also self-interested groups. A case study of such an institution based on local newspapers and police reports – as is possible for northwest Germany – would have given more substance to his claims on the complexity of the relationship to the larger society. Thereby he might have shown the segmentation he claimed characterized Imperial Germany. In particular, such cases could have been used to analyze group aims which were tangential to the unions or the party. In addition to the pub keepers' associations, the semi-professional association of writers, journalists and intellectuals might have been explored. Further, when examining educational work, the programs offered to youth could have been considered since the youth movement too created libraries, educational courses and meeting places.

This study will force the orthodox views on socialist labor to be reexamined. Much more than the Evans/Geary attempts at revision by examining deviancy, this study challenges the integrationist perspective. The pluralism instead of the cohesiveness of Social Democracy will have to be reconsidered. So also will the differences which separated Social Democracy from German society. Lidtke has performed an overdue and important service.

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